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ABSTRACT

Chicano youth violence (CYV) is a serious problem, progressively more generalized and vicious and increasingly involving girls and children as assailants and also attacks on old people, whites and Mexican nationals. Becoming romanticized and institutionalized into a subculture, CYV is an important factor in the destruction of authentic Chicano culture. CYV is destroying social interaction settings and is interfering with rituals, rites of passage, and ceremonies which promote cultural identity and unity. In an effort to increase understanding of the sources of CYV, 11 youths from rival Chicano gangs in Phoenix, Arizona, were flown over the city to see parts of society normally denied them. The youths, aged 14-17, took half-hour flights in small aircraft whose pilots donated their time and airplanes so the youths could conduct sociological field research into Phoenix. After seeing the difference between affluent Anglo neighborhoods and business districts and poor Chicano areas, the youths were better able to appreciate the psycho-social implications of class stratification and racism on their lives. Also, the flights resulted in new friendship bonds among rival gangs and demand for future flights. However, because of the limited availability of aircraft and pilots, future flights were in doubt. (SB)

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[An Experiment to Help Reduce Chicano Youth Violence]

Teaching Chicano Youth
The Sociology of Barrio Social Problems
With the aid of
Small Airplane Flights

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by
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Paper presented at the Annaul Meeting of the Western Social Science Association (25th, Albuquerque, NM, April 27-30, 1984).

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* D.S.W, UCLA, 1980. Assistant professor, School of Social Work, Arizona State University, Tempe, Az. 85287. Gratefully acknowledged is the help of the youth and staffs of Behavioral Health Advocates, and Metro-Youth Centers Inc., of Phoenix Arizona. Special thanks are extended to pilots John Marin, Pat Moreland, and Sonny Najera for believing in "the idea" and for furnishing their planes and bearing the costs of flying Chicano youth over the Phoenix metropolitan area.

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Abstract

This paper defines and discusses Chicano Youth violence (CYV) as a little appreciated but important contributing factor to the destruction of the authentic Chicano culture. This paper also presents the rationale for, and results of an action research experiment to help reduce CYV in metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona. The experiment treated a group of CYV implicated youngsters to two "problem-posing" (Freire, 1968) educational experiences intended to stimulate sociological awarenesses regarding CYV and other barrio social problems. The basic assumption of the two part program was that this educational exposure would help youth reject harmful myths and attitudes which promote CYV. An innovative feature of the second educational session were trips in a small airplanes over metropolitan Phoenix. Eleven youths (ten boy and one girl) and five adult community youth worker participated in the half hour flights. The results of the experiment suggest that slow flying aircraft are very attractive field research tools for Chicano youngster to use in comprehending the sociology of barrio social problems, and for promoting self awareness and interbarrio brotherhood.

It's not just Chicanos

While it is necessary to focus on Chicano youth violence (CYV) in this paper, it is important to put CYV in perspective against world and national trends in youth violence. Further, it is also important to state that the vast majority of Chicanos are hard working decent citizens. Thus, it is hoped that no part of this paper be misconstrued to suggest that Chicanos have a cultural or genetic proclivty for violence or deviance.

From a global perspective, life for millions of people in diverse parts of today's world, is perceived as an existence of "hair-trigger, knife-edged, psychological turbulance" lived among a "swelling army of heavy breathers, kooks, flakes, weirdos, and psychos." (Toffler, 1978:366-367). In America, many citizens live in constant fear of violence; and are almost everywhere afraid to venture out alone at night, even when in dire need.(Silberman, 1978; Skogan and Maxfield,1981). As indexed by our society's movies, magazines, records, and T.V. fare, America appears to be fascinated by violence.[1]

According to the National Violence Commission Report of 1969, the major factors directly and indirectly implicated in supporting urban violence are:

> 1. low income , 2. physical deterioration, 3. dependency, 4. racial and ethnic concentrations, 5. broken homes, 6. working mothers, 7. low levels of education and vocational skills, 8. high unemployment, 9. high proportion of single males, 10. overcrowed and substandard housing, 11. high rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality, 12. low rates of home ownership or single family dwellings, 13. mixed land use, and, 14. high population density.

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1. The contents of media products have been accused of promoting violence. See Windshuttle (1978) for some pointed observations of how the media sometimes promotes class violence. Public debates on this issue are, of course, common currency.

All of the violence associated factors listed above are, of course, well known to Chicanos living in America's urban barrios. In an analysis of world youth violence in capalists countries, Windshuttle (1978) found low social class to be strongly associated with school problems and various forms of youth violence. In a set of observations which seem especially relevant to the Chicano youth experience, Windshuttle observed,

> "They learn very quickly that they inhabit an unequal society where rewards go to the already priviledged. . . [t]hese young men maintain the rebellious habits they developed at school. Only they don't often direct their antagonism at those in authority. . . Their energy and anger become deflected --- they fight with each other, they search for quick thrills, ... obliterate their consciousness with alcohol or drugs and, most pathetically, they work off their sense of injustice by lording it over working class girls." (Windshuttle,1978:16, emphasis added.)

With the above contextual orientation of youth violence as a widespread national and world phenomenon, we will next focus on Chicano youth violence in the barrios of America.

Chicano Youth Violence

Even after eight long years, whenever I learn of a Chicano youth dying violently in the barrio, I recall the death of my neighbor a young USC law student. The memory of Ralph Michael Sanchez' dying while gently caressed in my wife's arms, as his anguished brother and a circle of neighbors looked on, remains vivid to this day. Shortly after being shot through the brain he was trying to develop, he died without ever knowing why that bullet found him as he stood innocently chatting with a friend on a barrio porch. Over the years, many hundreds of Chicano youths throughout America have yielded to forces they do not understand to injure or kill each other because they have learned to define themselves as mortal enemies. Ironically, as in cases of barrio gang warfare, barrio youth are beating, stabbing, and shooting each other over insults to blighted barrio "turf" which Chicanos do not even own!

A foreboding feature of Chicano youth violence (CYV) is that it is progressively getting more generalized and vicious in nature. It is now a mistake to consider it simply a youth versus youth phenomenon as in times past. As many Chicanos know, CYV often injures or kills people who, like Sanchez, are innocent victims of circumstances.[2] The problem is so serious that tee-shirts with the words "POR QUE ?" printed over a weeping Christ holding a dead youth in his hands are popular sales items in barrios in the Sothwest. A trend which is alarming Chicanos is that CYV is now commonly implicated in bizarre forms of terrorism against formerly respected and

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2. The reader can guage the extent of this concern by randomly reviewing the contents of letters to the editors, feature articles, and editorials which have been appearing for years in Chicano magazines such as Q-Vo, Low Rider, and Firme. These very popular national circulation, magazines are invaluable research useful chronicles for helping to assess the psychological and social costs of CYV in the barrio.

defenseless citizens. As for example, the elderly man who was shot point blank by a barrio teenager for complaining about loud music at a Christmas party. Equally unsettling for Chicanos who value their authentic culture are newer forms of social malaise, which suggest that: (a) girls and children are increasingly actively involved in violent acts; (b) that old people and White citizens are no longer "off-limit" targets of CYV; (c) that Mexican nationals (especially youth) are becomming targets of CYV; and (d) that CYV is becoming romanticized and institutionalized into an "vato loco" subculture.

The following excerpt from Veloz (1981) and newspaper accounts will help illustrate some of the manifestation of CYV in and out of the barrio.

1. Loquita: Yeah, (they'll call the police), if they are new or just plain stupid, but if they do we'll shoot up their pad, or fuck up someone in their familia like the jefito (father) or whoever is around. Or we from the varrio get together in front of their pad and throw cans and shit at it, and that's about it. They may call the jura (police) and have them take us in but there's always more of us left to take care of business." (Veloz, 1981, p.94)

2. Police said the three had quarreled with several drivers of low riders near Central and Roesser about 11:30 p.m. Sunday. [The three] returned to their homes to get a 12-guage shotgun and .38 caliber pistol, ... (then they) opened fire on a group of people sitting in a parking lot and shot the windows out of a car belonging to Ray Garcia, 18. (Phoenix Gazette, 6-1-1980).

3. Police said Richard Fiore, [a White man was fatally] shot once above the left ear with a pistol by a Hispanic male he apparently did not know. . . . Eight witnesses told police Fiore spoke angrily to the suspect for pulling too close to his vehicle.

After an exchange of obsenities, the suspect started throwing beer cans and bottles at Fiore's car. . . then pulled out a middle caliber pistol and shot Fiore in the head. (Arizona Republic, 8-31-1981)

4. Five youths pummeled ice cream vendor Victorino A. Paredes, 67, until he slumped over in the front seat of his makeshift refrigerated truck. The killers tossed ice cream and candy to onlookers. Then they took the $12 in Paredes' wooden cash box, ignoring Paredes as he lay dying. (San Pedro, Ca. News Pilot, 9-25-1974)

In a metaphorical sense, CYV resembles a poison which is progressively destroying a people famous for their generosity, compassion, familial loyalty, self reliance, and reverence for all living things.

Chicano Youth Violence: A Culture Poison

Despite the fact that some misguided Chicano spokemen have minimized the phenomenon of CYV, I will attempt to demonstrate that CYV is an important contributing factor to the destruction of the authentic Chicano culture. When CYV is viewed as a pandemic phenomenon in America, it is hard to agree with the Chicano "leader" who told the press, "This gang thing has been blown out of proportion. . . There isn't a major problem with organized gangs per se, ... What you have in several neighborhoods is kids coming together, cruising in their low-riders because they don't have anything else to do." ("Tommy" Espinosa, The Arizona Republic,8-20-1978).

Even if one ignores the assaults and homocides which make the six O' clock news, CYV, in all its less dramatic guises, is still a very important problem which Chicanos must adapt to as best they can. In many barrios CYV is like a chronic background noise which residents are forced to tolerate. Consider how the fireman's widow unacustomed to this "noise", described the situation: "Everyone seems to fear retaliation if they speakout [against Chicano youth gang activity]. I came in here and bought my house at a bargain. . . Now I understand why it was a bargain. . . people shouldn't have to live like this." (Phoenix Gasette, 2-11-1980)

Seldom brought to the consciousness of barrio outsiders are the countless unreported acts of CYV which which chronically irritate, injure, and traumatize barrio citizens. As a participant observer of urban barrio life, I have come to know:

1. Families whose homes are pocked with bullet holes, and whose children are forced to live, lizard-like, close to the floor to avoid being shot by "drive-by" terrorists from "rival" barrios;
2. Homes in which children are routinely posted as round-the-clock look-outs to warn the family of potential harm;
3. Families which regard tough kids, mean dogs, baseball bats, guns, religous artifacts, and prayer as vital necessities for survival;
4. families suffering the loss of a potential income earner through violent death or incarceration;
5. Mothers and children with serious emotional problems caused by living in unremitting unease and even terror;

The quality of barrio life is also lowered by a variety of seldom considered CYV induced irritations such as gang grafitti, police sirens, and the sounds of screeching tires and gunfire from drive-by "cappers" from rival barrios.

When the whole range of CYV major traumas and petty irritations are summed together, it becmes easier to appreciate why Chicanos often express a special kind of joy when a family of friends manages to escape the barrio for more serene enviroments.

Other Important Culture Destroying Aspect of CYV

CYV, like a slow acting poison, is also contributing to the death of the authentic Chicano culture by (1) destroying important social interaction settings; and (2) by interferring with or disrupting important rituals, rites of passage, and ceremonies which promote cultural identity, and unity.

Settings: Because of CYV as a factor, I have known churches, theaters, recreation centers, and libraries which are now vacant or underutilized; and of "barriadas" where the fear of CYV forces cross-town friends and kin to visit each other under the cover of darkness to avoid being mistaken as "outsiders".

Ceremonies: I have also known considerable numbers of annoyed citizens (Chicanos as well as others) who, because of the potential of CYV, apprehensively attend or avoid attending culturally important ceremonies such as weddings, baptismals, and even wakes.

Finally, but exceedingly imporatant, as Moore (1978), and Moore et al (1981) have shown for East Los Angeles, CYV elliminates many Chicanos from opportunities to participate in occupations which support and promote better lives, because of social ruination suffered in personality twisting processes in correctional institutions.[3] Thus, it is suggested that CYV is a very

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3. Chicanos appropriately term prisons "torcidas" and to be arrested is termed being "twisted".

important problem which needs to be studied and understood by Chicano laymen and scholars for all its implications to the future welfare of Chicanos. It seems that without such efforts there will be little hope of finding realistic solutions to this problem. It was under this basic assumption, that the idea of flying CYV implicated barrio youth over metroplitan Phoenix, Arizona was conceived and implemented.

The Flying Idea

The background origins of the idea:

Since the night Sanchez was killed, I became interested in CYV. Gradually, I began to see the phenomenon as a natural artifact of a society which, in sundry artful ways, provides the ingredients which produce violence in the barrio. In the vein suggested by Ryan (1971), Braithwaite and Condon, (1978), Windshuttle (1978), Moore (1978), and Sharff (1981), Chicano youth involved in CYV began to appear both victims and victimizer of their own culture. From field observations in numerous settings, it was apparent that many public and private programs to deal with CYV were ineffective primarily because they focused on superficial symptoms and defined the problem from a blaming the victim perspective. During the period 1977-1979, somewhat as suggested by Freire (1968), I gradually came to conclude that Chicano laymen had a legitimate right to study, discuss, research and be provided the resources to understand the etiology and implications of such social problem as poverty, drug abuse and CYV. Drawing upon my readings in general sociology, psychology, symbolic interactionism; and also drawing upon my clinical and research experiences with Chicano heroin addicts, I began to share my book and field

knowledge with captive audiences in heroin addiction treatment programs. Later, through trial and error, I began to find that Chicano laymen of all ages and backgrounds, under appropriate circumstances, were favorably disposed to my efforts.

Stemming from these early pedogogical efforts there emerged a model of American society. This model was termed the "Fishtank Theory of Deviance" and proved useful for stimulating discussions and for conveying sociological concepts more efficiently to laymen. In this, special credit must be given Lofland (1969) and Matza (1969) for much of theoretical material that is imbedded in the layman's "Fishtank Theory of Deviance". Incidently, the idea for creating the "Fishtank Theory of Deviance" was serendipitously triggered by suddenly realizing that prisoners term new convicts "fish", and Chicano youth gangs sometimes name themselves barracudas, sharks and piranhas.

Throughout these years, I found that Chicano youngsters were, themselves, very puzzled as to the "real" origins the of social and psychological forces that caused them to hate, hurt, and kill the each other. Many were openly annoyed or suspicious of blaming the victim explanations such as those provided by social workers and other mental health professionals. Chicano youth appeared to be, everywhere observed, literally starving for knowledge and intellectual stimulation which would help them understand their own puzzling behavior from evidence directly linked to their own lives and enviroments. And finally, many hardened "vato loco" type Chicano youngsters, despite hostile outward appearances, were found to be sincerely desirous of <u>realistic</u> help (jobs, better schools, counseling) to avoid personal and social disaster.

The Testing of the Flying Idea:

One day in mid 1981, while trying to explain the implications of social stratification on a blackboard to a group of youngsters from the barrios of metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona, I was struck by the puzzled look on a boy's face. Wanting to reach that puzzled youngster, I blurted, " If you were to go up in a helicopter and look down over the city, you would be able to see with your own eyes what I mean." The flying idea was born that day. From then on, I was convinced that that poor Chicano youngsters deserved the resources and opportunity to conduct sociological field research into parts of society ordinarily denied them. I reasoned that if middleclass parents considered it important to take their children on educational junkets to strange enviroments such as Mexico, "to study the people and their culture", then, why shouldn't Chicanos study the dominant culture and its enviorments? For practical and other reasons, slow flying aircraft seemed ideal for the purposes of exploring places ordinarily denied Chicano youth to see first hand.[4]

It took a full year of diligent searching to find pilots willing to fly at their own expense, on a "one-time-only" basis, the youngsters. Ten boys and one girl from different "rival" Phoenix barrios were selected by their own lottery to go on the flying experiment. The youth were drawn from a roster of youngsters (ages 14 to 17) who had previously been exposed to the fishtank

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4. In this regard, it is well to understand that "barrio" Chicano are prevented by their own learned internal social control mechanisms (shame, fear of police harrassment, ridicule, etc.) and by various external social control devices (police patrols, guarded communities, and money) from actually entering social strata too far above their own. One may easily test this assertion by interviewing Chicanos who have accidently ventured beyond the tracks into places they are not wanted.

theory of deviance in community based court diversion programs for barrio youth. Five adults barrio youth workers (including two Viet Nam era paratroopers active in youth work) and this writer accompanied the "lucky" (their term) youngsters on their flights.

The Flight and Results

On a Sunday morning shortly after sunrise, May 2, 1982, the first group of four visibly apprehensive youngsters lifted off the earth in two gleaming airplanes. Those remaining behind were visibly moved by the sight. It seemed, that day, that each time a set of tense youngsters went through the ceremony of being strapped in and prepared by the pilots and paratroopers for their educational adventure, that we were witnessing a rite of passage. This impression was repeatedly reinforced by the changed demeanor and appreciation shown the pilots each time the plane discharged its load of joyous youngsters. Flying above the White communities of the Phoenix metropolitan area, the youths saw thousands of luxury homes (many with red Mexican tile roofs), thousands of shimmering blue swimming pools, numerous tennis courts, playgrounds, and parks. Among other things they also noted impressive looking schools and the modern steel and glass business and industrial sites where the better jobs are located.

By contrast, they saw the freeways, riverbeds, railroad tracks, industrial and agricultural zones that physically and sociologically divided their barrios from one another. Slowly, as they cruised over "La Pheniquera" they noted the parched real estate, narrow pot holed streets, salvage yards, cheerless black topped schools, and the blighted low paying industrial and commer-

cial sites where their parents worked. They also saw the acres of barrios where bulldozers were actively destroying barrio homes in the name of progress and urban renewal.

Finally, from above, they eagerly searched out their own "'hoods". . . hoping their parents and friends below would see the airplane; they saw thousands of tiny look alike weathered houses separated by narrow pot holed streets and alleys. They noted that most of the homes had reserves of used items in the backyards (e.g. old autos and parts, used lumber, household appliances, and broken toys).

From the spontaneous comments of the youth after experiencing their half hour adventures, and at the debriefing session at the end of the experiment, it was evident that the experiences of the day had helped the youth to better appreciate the psychological and social implications of class stratification and racism on their lives. All were impressed with the airplanes' ability to allow them to see places they did not know existed. They were struck by the visual contrasts between their barrios' evident poverty and the White communities' wealth. Everyone was especially taken by the sight of thousands of backyard pools in the White communities. And, one shy boy (who earlier had been observed alone reverently peering into the cockpit of an airplane he especially liked) opened up and said how stupid it seemed for Chicanos to be killing and hurting each other when they had so little. In addition, to observations and comments such as these, several unexpected dividends were derived from the flights. These were:

1. The youth were given a tour of the airport and control tower and allowed to touch airplanes and ask questions (by sensitive airport personnel who seemed to comprehend the importance of the event).

2. The youth workers indicated that they had derived unexpected knowledge and insights which would help them in their work.
3. The youth were given occupational counseling and realistically viable ideas by the host pilots of how they might prepare themselves for careers in the aeronautical industry.
4. Participation in the adventure way promoted new friendship bonds among youth from rival barrios. A general feeling of brotherhood characterized the entire Sunday event.
5. The youth came up with the idea of designing and making a banner with a message promoting barrio unity and brotherhood which could be towed over "La Pheniquera" on future flights.
6. The youth expressed the wish for future flights, "So my friends from the 'hood' can go."

Subsequent to the flights, word of the event spred through many of the barrios of "La Pheniquera" and months later youth still ask youth workers to be put on the list for the next flights. However, given the poverty of Chicanos and the fact that airplanes and pilots to fly them are not readily available to poor people, it will be difficult to "pull-off" future flights to meet demand. Efforts to continue the educational flying program has proven fruitless so far. Youth who ask about future flights are explained the the situation in a realistic way to avoid raising false hopes. All accept their long shot possibilities of ever being one of the lucky ones. This frustrating reality, youth understand, is, itself, a lesson about what life at the lower levels of society is like.

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